The SAFE Port Act: Using the Latest Technology to Secure Our Ports

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Our nation's 361 ports are enormous security and commercial operations. With approximately $1.3 billion in import and export goods transiting through them every day, they represent a vital economic artery for our nation. An attack on any one of America's ports would be devastating for not only our nation's economy, but global trade as well. Technology, combined with sophisticated data analysis, will lead the way in improving the security of our ports and in closing security gaps in the maritime environment.

Our nation was stunned by the attacks on September 11, 2001, and we immediately began to assess the security of all our transportation hubs, especially our ports. In 2002, the U.S. Congress passed the Maritime Transportation Security Act, which President George W. Bush signed into law shortly thereafter. While this vital legislation was an important first step to securing our ports, there was much that still needed to be done. It was important for Congress to move forward quickly. However, before this could be accomplished, it was essential to consider the balance needed between both the security of the physical infrastructure of the ports themselves and the impact those security requirements might have on our nation's systems of transportation and trade.

In 2005 and 2006, the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation passed legislation to strengthen maritime security without jeopardizing the free flow of commerce. This Commerce Committee legislation, along with bills from the Senate Homeland Security Committee and the Senate Finance Committee, formed a basis for the comprehensive port and maritime transportation security measure known as the Security and Accountability For Every (SAFE) Port Act, which Congress approved last September, and which the President signed into law on October 13, 2006.

The SAFE Port Act encompasses a number of measures to increase maritime security—ranging from cohesive strategic policies and improved procedures to the concrete deployment of advanced technology equipment both in the United States and abroad. This legislation will strengthen port security by establishing innovative programs utilizing data and state-of-the-art technology to enhance our ability to protect our borders.

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The use of technology is especially critical for improving port security. The SAFE Port Act ensures that the latest technology continues to improve the security of our ports, whether through accurately identifying personnel eligible to access the port or by scanning and screening the cargo coming through it.

One of the most important security and technology initiatives addressed in this measure is the nationwide use of the Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC). The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is directed to provide port and related transportation workers a TWIC card provided they do not pose a security risk. The TWIC program, managed by the TSA, requires background security checks and a biometric-based credential for all those working in or around U.S. ports. This TWIC credential will be used for access control and, with the incorporation of biometrics, will ensure that only those authorized will have access to secure areas.

The SAFE Port Act, for the first time, establishes timetables and procedures for expediting the TWIC program and addresses the necessary technology fundamentals needed to secure those working in our ports. The act also mandates interoperability between the cards and electronic card readers.

Another important program with critical technology components is the Container Security Initiative (CSI), which will screen and examine maritime containers that pose a security risk before these containers are loaded in foreign seaports for shipment to the United States. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security will designate certain foreign ports as CSI ports, based on specific criteria, and use the technical capabilities of non-intrusive inspection and nuclear and radiological detection equipment to scan cargo loaded at these foreign ports. This will allow dangerous or suspicious cargo to be identified before it reaches our nation's ports and waterways, where it poses a greater danger.

Here at home, screening technology will be used extensively to protect our ports and the free flow of trade that occurs in them. The legislation requires 100 percent screening of cargo containers unloaded at U.S. ports, as well as 100 percent scanning of high-risk containers. The new law requires the Department of Homeland Security, in coordination with other federal agencies and foreign governments, to increase the use of cargo inspection technologies.

In addition to the greater use of equipment and new security technologies, the SAFE Port Act also standardizes the automated targeting system program, which requires the submission of supply chain and entry data that is analyzed to improve targeting of high-risk cargo and threat materials. This data analysis will help the Department of Homeland Security to identify and examine areas that pose the greatest security threat in the maritime environment. The SAFE Port Act also contains a variety of other provisions, including $400 million in grants that will serve to improve maritime and port security infrastructure.

Comprehensive port security improves our nation's overall security while facilitating the free flow of commerce, a combination vital to our sustained economic strength and our way of life. The new port security technologies and programs contained in the SAFE Port Act ensure that our nation will be a secure state without becoming a security state. /st/